

## **Johanna Baruch: Cosmos**

George Lawson

For almost 10 years, San Francisco and West Marin-based painter Johanna Baruch (originally from New York) has been occupied with a series of meticulously crafted, jewel-surfaced paintings inspired by images of the deep reaches of outer space: stylized renderings of star clusters, bursting novae, floating giants and celestial dust. This series has grown into quite a substantial body of work, and although until recently limited in exposure to the San Francisco Bay Area, these paintings are starting to enjoy a wider audience.

At first glance, the Cosmos paintings might appear more simply beautiful than the art world would likely tolerate, given that forum's propensity for self reference and its skepticism of any work that is overly accessible. But with consideration, Baruch's handling seems to echo the undeniable wonder one feels at the discovery of new worlds, the newly charted realm she has chosen as her motif, one that might strike the viewer as more eccentric than it really is. The canon of Western art has historically categorized subject matter in painting as broadly falling into four primary modes: portrait, landscape, still-life and genre, the latter dealing with groups of figures as in allegorical or religious narratives. With a little stretch of the imagination, these four hold as well even for abstract painting. Although the first thing early ponderers gazed at with any intent must have been the deep heavens, somehow this most fundamental of motifs didn't make it amongst the canonical defaults. The impulse is there. I think of the Venetians. Elisabetta Marchioni's still-life's are like cosmologies, but even Venetian skies remain by association, earthbound. This constraint may simply have been for lack of telescopes. Galileo was an accomplished draftsman, as evidenced by his renderings of the phases of the moon. Had he been a painter, we might have inherited "extraterrestrial-scape" or "celeste" as our fifth primary painting category.

Given the technology at hand, the study of the heavens should be common subject matter, the archetype being a natural, and long overdue as a motif. Baruch seems to be doing her best to take up the slack. She uses the images of deep space as a catalyst, with the same license enjoyed by artists working in the other four modes, and like many painters from Vermeer forward, she often works from photographic sources, specifically the groundbreaking (literally) images taken by the Hubble Space Telescope.

Baruch paints in translucent oil and alkyd glazes on the smooth grounds of wood or aluminum panels, building up images of luminescent gloss, saturated color, and surprising depth. She exploits the undertones of the oil medium to the same affect that Van Eyck did when oils were a technical breakthrough, that is, to intimate through their transparency the overlap of the visual and the envisioned worlds, the place where spirit and matter meet.

The German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote, "*The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which he sees me.*" The implications of this pronouncement are at the core of Baruch's painting, in the way she mirrors the forms of microscopic and macroscopic scales, and to the extent that any searching outer gaze turns the eye inevitably inward. She not only paints cosmos; she paints cosmology. In her own words:

*“When I first saw the photographs taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, something profound shifted inside of me, as if I had suddenly found something I knew intimately, yet didn’t know I had lost. The pictures of deep space beckoned to me, or rather, its gravity pulled me inexorably into it. The beauty, color and movement, the astonishing science and ultimate mystery of the cosmos were like songs that called to be sung. And so I did, through paint.”*

Above she describes her inspiration with the original source material. Next she goes on to hint at the filter of her own sensibility, through which these fantastic but nonetheless photo realistic images are transformed, and achieve their second life:

*“I do not paint the cosmos literally, but study the science and look at the photographs until something hits me viscerally, whether these are the spectacular images of what the telescope captures, such as swirling nebulae, stars being born, galaxies colliding or supernovae exploding; or more theoretical concepts such as black holes, dark energy, the big bang or the cosmic web. These all live as a moving force inside me that guides my paintbrush, directs my choices and brings itself to life on my panels. I begin with a sense of vast emptiness inside me, and the act of painting creates a universe itself.”*

Part of the transformation from the original photograph in Baruch’s painted treatment is graphic: what is captured by the camera as finely distributed clusters tends to coalesce in her handling, become globular and elastic. The original colors become more intentional, more saturated and pronounced, with keyed juxtapositions of complementary hues and monochromes. The photographed shapes and light traces get stretched in her hands, becoming more referential and associative, perhaps reminding us of primordial or nautical life, and so on. Then, another part of the transformation has to do with her framing of the image, such that it is more indicative of the whole than would be a mere swatch cut out of a larger fabric. Her result is a pictorial rendering that is decidedly iconic, memorable, and with a binding internal structure. In spite of dealing with imagery that is inherently dispersed, Baruch achieves a singularity that is almost totemic. However, it is the very nature of her focus itself, rather than any bending, compositional anticipation of the panel’s edge, that imbues her fields with the centrifugal fix of a still point at the middle of a rallying orbit.

There’s a short poem by Wallace Stevens, *Anecdote of the Jar*, which aptly illuminates this power of a focal point to transform an environment, directly relevant to Baruch’s enterprise:

*I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill.*

*The wilderness rose up to it,  
And spiraled around, no longer wild.  
The jar was round upon the ground*

*And tall and of a port in the air.*

*It took dominion everywhere.  
The jar was gray and bare.  
It did not give of bird or bush,  
Like nothing else in Tennessee.*

Like nothing else on earth, one might say. Baruch's real subject matter, and the reason that her images are painstakingly rendered rather than given over to gestural abandon, her real motif, is genesis, the moment things start. The Creation. Perhaps this impetus is lying in wait behind all painting modes - the portrait, the still life, the landscape - but in Johanna Baruch's case, her subject matter, her methodology, and her motive are all of a piece, the eye that sees indistinguishable from the eye that is seen, and the vista painted inseparable from the vista to which the finished painting opens access.

George Lawson is a painter and writer about contemporary art, currently living and working in New York's Hudson Valley. From 2012 to 2020 he ran George Lawson Gallery, with exhibition spaces in San Francisco, Los Angeles, the East Bay and Marin. He participated in art fairs in New York, Basel, Miami, Los Angeles and San Francisco. GLG produced over 40 catalogs during its run, most with critical essays by Lawson.

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